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Acts 4:23-31 “What To Do When Trouble Comes”

Intro. I hope that you have come to realize by now that being a Christian does not mean that we are exempt from problems and difficulties. The fact is we as individuals or we as a church *will* face troubles and trials. It may come in the form of sickness, the loss of a friend, or loss of a job, or a host of other problems. When a major hurricane or earthquakes hits populated areas, many will lose everything and Christians are not exempt.

The early church faced its first big problem here in Acts chapter 4. The apostles were actively proclaiming the Gospel of our Lord when one day they were confronted with the opposition of the rulers of Israel. They threatened them with some harm if they did not stop preaching about Jesus Christ. Thus began the first persecution against the early church.

The important question should *not* be, “How can I avoid difficulties,” but “How should I *respond* to difficulties.” So how did they respond to the threats of the national leaders? They did not respond with fear or anger. They did not begin a campaign to overthrow the national government through terrorism. They did not form a committee to determine how to deal with the situation. The way they responded to this first trial is the way we should respond when we face trials and difficulties. So let’s learn from their example what we should do when we face trials and difficulties. First of all:

I. SEEK THE SUPPORT OF OTHER CHRISTIANS

Notice what v.23 says, “And being let go, they went to their own companions” They went and gathered the believers together, shared with them the problem, and led them in prayer. They sought the company and support of other believers. We have already learned from the book of Acts the importance of Christian fellowship. So here we see another example of the importance of fellowship in the life of the early church.

It was natural for the liberated apostles to seek the loving fellowship of other believers immediately upon their release. Persecution drives Christians together (cf. v.32a). So they left the hostility of the non-Christian world to seek out others who had a personal relationship with Christ, and who were indwelt by the same Holy Spirit. We live in a dog eat dog world. In the world there is conflict, jealousy, etc. Whenever you get tired of this old world, isn’t it great that you can leave it behind and get together with loving people? At least that is the way it should be.

This is what we should do as well. Don’t face your problems alone. Don’t go off and sulk. Don’t turn to drugs or alcohol to dull the pain and escape reality. You should feel free to turn to your brothers and sisters in Christ, share with them your burden, and let them pray for you in times of crisis. You should have a Christian support group that knows you, is committed to you, and will pray for you, and encourage you. If you are not an active participant in a small group, such as a Sunday School class, you will not have a support group in place when you need one in a time of crisis. So start meeting with a small group.

Now when we face troubles and get together with other believers, what should be the purpose of our gathering? When Baptists think of fellowship, we tend to think of eating together.

But that is not the only purpose of Christian fellowship! Why else should we gather together with other Christians?

A. To Share Burdens – Notice in the last of v.23 it says that Peter and John “reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them.” So they shared with their brothers and sisters about the threats they had received from the authorities. These threats of punishment could include a lashing with a whip, or imprisonment, and perhaps even death.

When we face troubles, we should feel free to go to our brothers and sisters in Christ and share those burdens with them. Gal. 6:2 says, “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” Sunday School classes should be a great opportunity to do this. I believe most of our classes provide opportunity for people to share prayer requests and concerns. On Wednesday night we do the same thing. The Home Group proposal that will be presented tonight includes a reference to this.

Let me give one important warning. When someone shares a prayer request, do not repeat it to others without their permission, especially outside a context of prayer. For example, suppose some dear wife of a non-believer shares her burden with her class. She shares that her husband has been verbally abusive to her. Then some dear soul gets on the phone to tell sister so-and-so what she heard. Or even worse, some brother shares it on social media. Once it gets on the gossip circuit, it eventually makes its way back to her husband, but by then the story has been embellished. Now what is he going to think of the church? If she had any hopes of getting him to church, that hope has just been lost. So be careful to maintain confidentiality with prayer requests.

But the purpose of Christian fellowship is not only to share burdens, but also:

B. To Pray with One Accord – In v.24 we read, “So when they heard that, they raised their voice to God with one accord...” Please notice that no idle discussion followed the apostles’ report. No plans or schemes were worked out to deal with the situation by offering some compromise between what Jesus commanded and what the rulers were demanding. No vote was taken to determine whether or not they should continue to preach the name of Jesus in their ministry. Instead, they turned at once to the Christ in whose name they had been forbidden to speak.

I will talk more about prayer later in the message, but notice that “they raised their voice to God with one accord...” The account of Peter and John led to a spontaneous outburst of united prayer. It is likely that one of the apostles lead in prayer, but everyone was voicing agreement with words of affirmation such as “Amen,” and “Yes, Lord.” One reason united prayer is important is because Jesus said in Mt. 18:19, “Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven.”

C. To Share Relevant Scripture – The prayer that followed included a timely reference to Scripture (vv. 25-26). Knowing God’s word in a time of crisis is such a source of strength and comfort. I know that is true in my own life. So the words of the Bible need to be stored in our hearts so that we can draw on them in a crisis. Like the animals that store food during the summer for the cold season, we too must spend time in God’s Word as a daily habit.

The second thing we should do when trouble comes is:

II. ACKNOWLEDGE THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

In this situation they were facing a powerful enemy. So they clearly understood the need to look to someone far greater than themselves. And here is an important principle: When you've got a problem, remember always that God is greater than your problem. They were dealing with a situation which they could not control, but they knew that this situation did not surprise or catch their God "off guard." God is sovereign. That means that God is in control, and He can handle any problem that we face. So when you face trouble, one of the most important things you can do is remember that God is sovereign. He is in control even when things seem out of control. Most of their prayer is a reflection on the sovereignty of God.

Notice by their example how we should acknowledge the sovereignty of God:

A. In How We Address God - On this particular occasion, they did not address God as "Father." Instead, they addressed Him as "Lord" in v.24. But this is not the usual word for "Lord" (*kurios*), but it is the word which has been transliterated into English by the word "despot" (*despotes*). It refers to a ruler who has absolute control over his subjects, such as a king. They prayed to a God who is in complete control of all things. The threats of these earthly rulers were no problem to the absolute Ruler of all mankind.

B. Acknowledge God as Creator – In v.24 we read, "You are God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them." This is one basis of God's absolute power over this world. He is the One who created it! And if God is powerful enough to create the universe, He is powerful enough to control it (cf. Col. 1:16-17).

C. Acknowledge Evidence of God's Sovereignty - The prayer goes on to assert how God's sovereignty had been revealed in recent history. Jesus faced a greater trial than you or I will ever face. Yet what happened to Him did not take God by surprise. He even predicted it. In vv.25-26 Peter quotes from Psalm 2, which prophecies that kings and rulers will oppose God and His Messiah. They will do this because of their desire to be free of divine control, and to exercise their own authority. Notice the predictions of their antagonism. In v.25 the word "rage" means to snort like a horse, to prance or stamp the ground, to put on lofty airs. They vainly imagine that they can overthrow the Lord and His Messiah.

Then in v.27 Peter moves from quoting prophecy, to citing the fulfillment in the ruler's conduct towards Jesus Christ. At that time there was an unprecedented joining of all the powerful forces. Herod and Pilate became friends. The Jewish elders joined forces with them. They feared the influence of Jesus on the common people and realized that if His doctrine should take hold and spread throughout the nation, their own prestige and influence was doomed. So they rebelled against divine authority to maintain their own authority. The Gentiles raged against Jesus in the person of the Romans who executed the sentence of death by crucifixion. The "peoples" who imagined vain things were His Jewish adversaries. They all agreed in saying, "We will not have this Man to reign over us" (Luke 19:14). So what chance did Jesus have? When they killed Him, it seemed like a great defeat. They thought that was the end of Him, and they would retain political and religious control.

Then when Jesus was crucified, the disciples must have wondered if God was really in control. No doubt they must have wondered how God could allow something so terribly bad to happen to Someone so good.

Have you ever questioned if God is really in control? No doubt the disciples did. But just hold on child of God! Notice in v.28 that what happened took place “to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done.” So the most evil deed ever done was within divine foreknowledge. Here we see that God allowed it for a purpose. When the people of the world killed Jesus, they were fulfilling God’s plan to save us from our sins. What they meant for evil, God meant for good. Then, God overthrew evil plans by resurrecting Jesus Christ from the dead. If God overcame their evil plans then, then the apostles should have been confident that God would overcome the threats of the leaders now!

Christianity has been hated more deeply and opposed more violently than any other religion. Yet, Christianity has triumphed over all, proof positive of its divine origin. Christianity had its origin in God; and since God cannot be defeated, and His Christ cannot be defeated, then it must follow that Christianity cannot be defeated! His purpose shall be carried out in spite of man’s evil heart. Isn’t that a comforting thought as you look out on the world today?

Years ago the captain of a large vessel set sail with his family from Liverpool, England. His destination was New York. One night when everyone was asleep, a sudden squall arose. The wind came sweeping over the water, struck the vessel and almost capsized it. Everything movable was sent tumbling and crashing, and the passengers became aware that they were in imminent peril. Everyone was alarmed, and many sprang from their berths and began to dress. The captain’s little daughter, just 8 years old, was awakened and cried with fright, “What’s the matter?” When they told her about the storm she asked, “Is Father on deck?” Assured that he was, the little one dropped back onto her pillow without a fear. In spite of the howling winds and crashing waves, she was soon fast asleep. She could rest in peace knowing that her father was in control. Never fear child of God, your Father is always on deck! [Illus.#C-1761]

So in the midst of your trials, just keep believing that God is still in control. Nothing is a surprise to God. He knows all about the trials we face. And God continues to overcome evil. Some day you shall look back and see the good that God was seeking to accomplish.

Something else we should do when we face trouble is:

III. SEEK THE LORD IN PRAYER

That’s what the early church did. We read in v.24, “When they heard this, they raised their voices to God...” That’s what we are to do. We are to lift our voice to God. We are to get God’s people praying with us regarding the problem we are facing. Because God is sovereign, because God is mighty, then He can do something about our trials and troubles. We can take our requests to God and know that He is able to answer.

This reminds me of the time when good King Hezekiah received a threatening and demanding letter from the King of mighty Assyria by hand of messengers. Hezekiah read it, and then “went up into the house of the Lord, and spread it before the Lord” (2 Kings 19:14). Even so, we should do as the hymn writer says, “Take your burden to the Lord and leave it there.”

So as we seek the Lord in prayer:

A. We Should Offer Our Requests – One important aspect of prayer is offering prayer requests. Phil. 4:6-7 says, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” Instead of being overwhelmed by your problems, pray about your problems.

Now as we think about offering our prayer requests to God in times of trouble, what should we pray for?

1. Don't Ask for a Premature Deliverance from Your Trial – Did you notice that they did not ask to be spared from persecution? They did not for protection, or favor with the authorities. Instead, they prayed for the courage to overcome their threats. But so often we pray for deliverance from trouble instead of victory over trouble. We should not ask for the trial to be removed until God has accomplished His purpose for that trial.

2. Leave Retribution to God – In v.29 they asked God to look on the threats of the leaders, but they did not do anything against the leaders themselves. They left the whole matter to God. After all, Psalm 2 warned of wrath and destruction upon the enemies of God and His Anointed. Three times in the Bible God says, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay” (Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19; Heb. 10:30). They knew that God could handle this problem.

3. Pray for Boldness to Advance the Gospel – The progress of the gospel should be our primary concern in prayer, not our personal comfort. So in essence, they prayed that the word of salvation would continue to be preached and that it would prevail. In v.29 the word “speak” is a present tense, which means that they were asking the Lord to help them keep on speaking God's Word. It is significant that their prayer requests only had to do with evangelism, which has just been outlawed!

Now they knew that especially under these conditions, they would need boldness encourage to continue preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. So in v.29 they ask God to “grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word.” Peter and John had recently demonstrated such boldness when they defied the Sanhedrin. Notice what they said in vv.19-20, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.” But now they pray for courage and boldness to live up to their brave words.

Most of us are not bold when it comes to witnessing. We need to gather together and pray for more boldness, or we will be much more likely to remain silent about our faith. Look for opportunities to share your faith and pray for boldness that you will do so.

4. Pray for Mighty Confirmation – In v.30 they asked God to confirm their message of salvation “by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus.” They were preaching a “new” message, and because it was new and different, and because of the opposition of the leadership, they needed God to confirm its truth. The working of miracles would get the attention of the people, and help them to see that God was speaking through them.

I believe that we should pray that God will manifest His power through our lives and our church ministry. I want to see souls saved, drug addicts set free, lives changed, families put back together, and sinners made right with God. May God heal the sick as we pray for them. May God continue to confirm His Word through such miracles!

Finally, when we ask of God we should:

B. Anticipate God's Answer - Prayer according to the will of God is answered in a positive way. I Jn. 5:14-15 says, “...if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.”

Now notice how God answered the prayer of the apostles. In v.31 we read, “And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken....” Wouldn't you like to have been there in that prayer meeting? This shaking was a sign of a theophany, a manifestation of

the presence of God (Ex. 19:18; Isa. 6:4). It was God's way of indicating that He was present there and would answer their prayer. What an experience to pray and to even feel God respond by shaking the building where you are praying! The assurance of divine favor and help came even as they prayed.

At crucial times in our lives God comes to us with a revelation of Himself that calms our troubled minds. He did this through a vision to Paul when he faced much opposition in Corinth (18:9-10). At other times God's assurance comes through something that happens to us: We read or hear something that speaks specifically to us; someone gives us a gift of money in a time of serious financial crisis; someone says a word of encouragement during a time of deep discouragement.

Notice what else happened. We read that "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit..." It should be observed that this was *not* what the group prayed for. Their prayer was for boldness, etc. God answered by giving to them a fresh filling of His Spirit that they might have boldness. We need to seek the filling of the Holy Spirit whenever you are ready to do a work of God.

Then, God answered their specific prayers. We read in the last of v.31, "and they spoke the word of God with boldness." The group lost no time in acting on this fresh manifestation of divine power by bearing effective witness to the Lord Jesus. The word "spoke" translates an imperfect tense, which describes continuous past action. They kept on speaking with boldness. Furthermore, we read in v.33, "And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus."¹

Remember that they had also asked for mighty confirmation. So look over to chapter 5, v.12, "And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people." Notice it was by the hands of the apostles, for God wanted to confirm that the message *they* were preaching was true.

Now look down to v.14 of chapter 5, where we will see the result of answered prayer. Luke reports, "And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women." Satan was trying to stop Christianity dead in its tracks. But when the Church moved forward in prayer, Satan is no match! Prayer is the key to a powerful church!

Conclusion: Think of what could happen in our church if we prayed like we ought to? Don't you believe that God still answers prayer today? If we prayed like the early church, I wonder how many more people would be saved and come to know Christ as Savior? If we prayed like we should, we would have a far greater impact upon our community. Instead of the church acting like the world, we would see more of our world wanting to imitate believers in Christ! What will you do to help build the prayer ministry of this church? Soon our prayer room will be ready. And many will use that prayer room? How many more will participate in our prayer meetings? Will you recommit your life to be more of a praying Christian?

Sources: F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954); H. Leo Eddleman, *An Exegetical and Practical Commentary on Acts* (Dallas: Books of Life Publishers, 1974); Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); Oliver B. Greene, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. 1 (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, Inc., 1968); Everett F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975); H.A. Ironside, *Acts* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1943); John MacArthur, Jr., *How to Handle Persecution: Study Notes on Acts 4:1-32; 8:1-8; 16:19-40* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1985); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); A.T. Robertson, *New Testament*

¹ By the way, in this case the filling of the Holy Spirit was not manifested by the speaking of tongues. Rather, "they spoke the Word of God with boldness."

Word Pictures, Vol. IV (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931; W.H. Griffith Thomas, *Outline Studies in Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956); Curtis Vaughan, *Acts: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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